

Meditation may lower blood pressure

Stress reduction benefit seen

In this story:

New theories about an ancient practice

Worth further study

(CNN) -- Practicing meditation may play an important role in controlling certain risk factors for heart disease, according to a recent study.

Published in the March 3 issue of the journal *Stroke*, the study indicates that transcendental meditation, practiced for 20 minutes twice a day, has a positive, measurable effect on the buildup of fatty deposits in arteries, or atherosclerosis.

The reported decrease, measured by ultrasound, was tiny -- about 98 hundredths of a millimeter (slightly less than four-hundredths of an inch) -- but significant, the study concluded. Just that small reduction in deposits could reduce the risk of heart attack by 11 percent, and reduce the risk of stroke by 15 percent.

HEART DISEASE:

Description

Risk

Symptoms

Treatment

Prevention

Choose a link above to learn more about heart disease.

Source: WebMD

"Once the body's gained this deep quality of rest that transcendental meditation produces, then what we find is that there's a reduction in stress," said Chinelo Haney, one of nine study authors.

Researchers from the College of Maharishi Vedic Medicine in Fairfield, Iowa, conducted the study along with others from Charles Drew University of Medicine and Science in Los Angeles and the University of California, Los Angeles.

New theories about an ancient practice Transcendental Meditation is one of a number of disciplines that make up the Ayurvedic catalog of medicine. Philosophically, the medical system dates from preventive-disease practices developed more than 2,000 years ago in India.

Both the philosophy and the meditative practice first gained attention in the West in the 1960s with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and the Beatles. Since then, author/physician Deepak Chopra's work has done much to promote the system.

Minister and counselor Linda Logan certainly believes the meditative technique is valuable.

"You find that pretty soon, whatever's going on 'out here' just sort of goes away," she said. "You know, when you come back, it seems like you always have an answer, or the ability to handle whatever's going on."

Other studies have shown the meditation to be effective in lowering blood pressure. Hypertension, also a risk factor for heart disease, affects about 50 million people in the United States.

"We don't really know for sure, but what we can theorize is that it's quite possible meditation ... is actually stimulating the body's own self-repair mechanisms," said Haney.

Worth further study

The study followed 60 African-Americans with hypertension. Some practiced transcendental meditation for an average of seven months, while others participated in health-education sessions. African-Americans were targeted because of the population's disproportionately high rates of high blood pressure, the authors wrote.

Fatty deposits in the carotid arteries were measured before and after the study period.

Previous studies also have linked the practice of transcendental meditation to lowered blood pressure, but the effect appears to be transitory, according to some medical authorities.

No one is suggesting the meditation be used in the place of standard treatments for heart disease. But when the study first was released, the American Heart Association noted that "people with high blood pressure may want to medicate and meditate."

Heart disease, which affects some 12 million people in the United States, is characterized by increasing blockage of coronary arteries, which gradually starves the heart muscle of oxygen.

Complete blockage of an artery can lead to a heart attack. Standard treatments include clot-busting drugs, balloon angioplasty and coronary artery bypass. Bypass surgery is one of the most common chest surgeries performed.

Any surgical procedure entails risk, though bypass is typically very successful. Still, its beneficial effects are limited to about 10 or 15 years. Repeat surgery also is common.

For this reason, any treatment that can have a potential significant effect on heart disease is worth further study, many believe.

Last year, the National Institutes of Health gave the Maharishi center a \$7.5 million grant to study heart disease and African-Americans.

CNN correspondent Rhonda Rowland contributed to this report.